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National Intelligence Bulletin

August 25, 1975

CHINA-ANGOLA

The Chinese have had an uneasy feeling for some time that they were betting on the wrong horse in Angola. The recent fighting there has done little to assuage these fears. The National Front for the Liberation of Angola, which has been receiving the bulk of Chinese military aid, has held its own but has been unable to gain any ground since being forced out of Luanda in July by the Soviet-backed Popular Movement.

The National Front would have been in even worse shape if Peking had not acceded to a new request for arms and gone out of its way to make sure the supplies were received quickly. The aid is still considerably less than the Soviets are supplying to the Popular Movement.

At this point, Peking may well harbor some regrets at having switched its support from the Popular Movement to the National Front a year and a half ago. Even though the Popular Movement was the preeminent liberation group at that time, the Chinese had become thoroughly disenchanted with the Movement's growing ties to Moscow. Furthermore, by late 1973 China was attempting to curry favor with Zairian President Mobutu who had long been a strong backer of the National Front.

Earlier this summer, the fast-changing situation in Angola led Peking to toy briefly with a restoration of its contacts with the Popular Movement. In June, for the first time in almost two years, a Popular Movement delegation visited Peking. The Chinese tried to persuade the group to reduce its dependence on the Soviet Union, but its sympathies with Moscow reportedly were quite evident.

Having failed in this approach, the Chinese have tried other ways to shore up their position in Angola. In addition to channeling more aid to the National Front, Peking has reportedly begun to give weapons to Angola's smallest group, the National Union. The Chinese—who have given funds to this group in the past—apparently want to preempt any Soviet move to establish links with the Union. In the future, the National Union could affect the balance of forces should it throw its lot in with one of the other groups.

Ideally, Peking would like to see an effective cease-fire in Angola. The New China News Agency has taken every opportunity to play up the theme of unity among the three groups. The short-lived cease-fire arranged at the end of June was given particularly favorable treatment in the Chinese media.

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China evidently sees brighter prospects for the National Front at the bargaining table than on the battlefield. The Chinese push for negotiations is an obvious attempt to prevent a further deterioration in the Front's military position. While Peking is not optimistic about chances for a cease-fire in the near term, it may hope that its aid to the National Front will help stalemate the fighting and eventually persuade the Popular Movement to come to the bargaining table.

If this strategy fails and the three Angolan groups continue to fight, Peking will be placed in a more awkward position. The Chinese could simply cut their losses and halt military aid, but this would be regarded throughout Africa as capitulation to the Soviets, and a premature one at that. A Popular Movement victory would substantially bolster Moscow's position in southern Africa.

On the other hand, if Peking deepens its involvement, the price would be considerable. Peking would be required to increase its military assistance and invest more of its political prestige, but it would still face, at best, an uncertain outcome. For precisely these reasons, China has been reluctant in the past to become involved in third-world internecine conflicts.

With few other options available, the Chinese most likely will continue their military aid at approximately the current level. At the same time, Peking will urge other backers of the National Front, principally Zaire, to increase military aid. This will not be easy for Kinshasa because its own economic difficulties have placed limits on the assistance it can deliver.

If the Soviets step up their aid to the Popular Movement and this is translated into battlefield successes, Peking may increase its military aid to Zaire somewhat, on the understanding that this would be turned over to the National Front. On the diplomatic front, China will probably continue to lobby with the Angolans as well as other African states for an effective cease-fire.

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